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SUBJECT: IRAQ/ITALY - TRANSCRIPT AND COMMENT ON  
BERLUSCONI'S TROOP REDUCTION COMMENTS

REF: ROME 886

Classified By: A/DCM SCOTT KILNER, REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: PM Berlusconi's comments on the March 15 edition of ""Porta a Porta,"" a popular television news/interview program, suggesting the withdrawal of Italian troops from Iraq beginning in September of this year, have made an impact in both the Italian popular press and in international media. As is often the case, his comments were taken out of context in some cases and in others spun according to the political leanings of editors. In fact, the Prime Minister's comments were not much different from what the Italian Government has been saying for some months -- Italy would like to get its troops out of Iraq sooner rather than later, but not at the expense of Iraqi security and democracy-building efforts. Berlusconi's immediate reassurance to us (reftel) that there is no real change in Italy's policy underlines the extent to which his surprise announcement is driven by imminent regional elections. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Given the sensitivity of this issue and in the interests of maximum clarity, Embassy is providing at end of this cable a transcript of our unofficial translation of the PM's comments. (See Para 6.)

¶3. (SBU) In the March 16 edition of centrist La Stampa, Berlusconi spokesperson Paolo Bonaiuti elaborated on the Prime Minister's remarks. "First, the Iraqi Government must be in agreement (with an Italian withdrawal). Then our Allies must agree. Finally the highest military authorities must find an understanding over procedures. In sum, we will try to begin the withdrawal in September and we will seek to bring it to conclusion by the end of the year." (Embassy note: The phrasing could mean either the end of 2005 or within a one-year time period.) "These are our intentions, but then we must take into account reality," Bonaiuti concluded.

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COMMENT: IT'S ALL ABOUT ELECTIONS  
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¶4. (C) Like other national leaders, Berlusconi is finding discussion of an exit strategy to be an asset when facing elections. What surprised us is his decision to play this card now, before regional elections in which Iraq will be a minor issue. A growing majority of the Italian public opposes the continued Italian deployment in Iraq. In the wake of the liberation of hostage Giuliana Sgrena and the shooting of Italian intelligence official Nicola Calipari, a La Stampa poll published this week shows 47% favoring withdrawal (up from 35% in February) and only 14% favoring remaining under current conditions.

¶5. (C) Berlusconi's and Bonaiuti's caveats will leave the Prime Minister lots of wiggle room to avoid withdrawal if the situation in Iraq does not improve by September, and/or if Iraq/U.S./UK push him hard to maintain Italy's presence. However, Berlusconi's reassurances to us of ""no change in policy"" (reftel) could still run up against electoral reality. In national elections next year, voters will be more likely to remember the ""promise"" in the headlines than the caveats underneath. Watching the polls as astutely as he does, Berlusconi could find himself pushed into a symbolic withdrawal -- or more -- by the end of the year. END COMMENT.

¶6. (U) Begin transcript of segment of March 15 edition of ""Porta a Porta." Names other than Berlusconi's refer to journalists who appeared with him on the program:

Mario Orfeo, (managing editor of Naples daily Il Mattino): Both you and FM Fini talked about exit strategy. When? What does it depend on? Does it depend on us, on the Americans or an Iraqi request?

Berlusconi: It depends on the capacity the Iraqi government will have to set up adequate security and police forces

because the birth and the growth of democracy in Iraq can take place only if the minimally acceptable conditions of security are in place in the country. Therefore, we, I personally and deeply, talked about this with Tony Blair, saying we must create a precise & exit strategy<sup>8</sup> (said in English), also because our public opinions are waiting for this communication. And we agreed that we will talk about this in the near future as we link this to the will and the organizational ability of the next Iraqi government to increase their capability of self defense so that we can in parallel and in a complementary way reduce our presence in Iraq.

Bruno Vespa (host): Is it realistic to imagine that we would withdraw after the national elections at the end of the year?

Berlusconi: I think we will certainly begin reducing the number of our military even before, in accordance(

Paolo Gambescia (Il Messaggero managing editor):  
(Interrupting) Even before the end of the year?

Berlusconi: Even before the end of the year.

Vespa: This is news.

Berlusconi: It is our will to aim for a possible reduction even before the end of the year, in agreement with our allies, and with the Iraqi government.

Orfeo: You gave us very good news.

Berlusconi: We are working on this direction because we are self-aware. Let's remember with pride that we are the 6th largest economy in the world and therefore we have to take responsibility for democracy and freedom in the world. Without democracy there is no real freedom, and without real freedom there cannot be growth in countries. Therefore I believe the commitment - as suggested to President Bush and the Republican majority, the American majority, out of their Constitution ) to assume the role of world leader, that he has wanted to do this, is something very positive. Only when we will no longer have those 30 or 40 countries where human dignity is not respected will it be possible to have countries that grow in well being. I'm absolutely convinced that the western countries will bear some blame if the sub-Saharan African countries have no conditions of well being. They have not been able to give themselves conditions of democracy, hence freedom, hence they have not known growth and well being.

Vespa: So, in your opinion, how many months until the first leave?

Berlusconi: I think that beginning in September, in the talks I have had with my colleagues, beginning in September we would like to begin a progressive reduction of our soldiers in Iraq. We are proud to be the third country in terms of number of soldiers in peacekeeping operations. We are the third after the US, after the UK, we are third. And also in Iraq our contingent of 3,300 men is the third, after the US and UK.

End transcript segment.

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